GOD, HUMAN BEING, WORLD

Introduction

Karl Löwith (1897–1973)

Complete English translation of the supplied German text

INTRODUCTION

"It would not be worth the trouble to live to be seventy years old, if all the wisdom of the world were folly before God."*

The title of the metaphysical trinity—God, human being, and world—comes, in its didactic formulation, from the rational philosophy or logic of Christian Wolff. In Chapter 3 (§§ 55–56), he distinguishes three parts of philosophy. The first concerns God, the second the human soul, and the third the corporeal things of the world. God is the *author rerum* [author of things]; the soul is that which is conscious of itself within us; corporeal things are *outside us*. Unlike God, soul and body are not *entia a se* [beings from themselves], but created things. Knowledge exists only of these three, and philosophy can therefore have no more than three parts. It is *metaphysica specialis* [special meta*physics*]. We shall not trace the far-reaching historical origins of this division; instead, we ask about the substantive connection among these three inherited fundamental questions of post-Christian philosophy, and about the consequences—once God has been dispensed with—of the familiar reduction of God, human being, and world to: human being and world. Theism, deism, and

NOTES

* To bring out the deeper meaning of Goethe's saying, chosen as the epigraph, compare Psalm 90:10 and 1 Corinthians 21.

1. "The titles cosmology, psychology, and theology—or the triad nature, human being, God—describe the domain within which all Western thinking moves whenever it thinks beings as a whole in the manner of meta*physics*." Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche II (1961), p. 59.

Atheism are stages on the road to a godless world and thus to a worldly human being.

Put in a formula that can serve as our guide: the path of the history of philosophy leads from Greek cosmo-theology [Kosmotheologie][2] through Christian anthropo-theology [Anthropotheologie] to human emancipation. Philosophy becomes anthropological to the same extent that the human being emancipates himself from the Greeks' divine cosmos and the Bible's transcendent God, finally taking over the creation of the human world himself. At the endpoint of this liberation from everything that might bind him stands Nietzsche's unique attempt to will the world as it was before Christianity, through his teaching of the Übermensch [overhuman], who rises at the same time as God declines and then teaches the eternal recurrence of a world that wills itself, to which he attributes divinity under the name "*Dionysian*." Whatever the world's status—originally divine, created by a transcendent God, become godless and then deified anew—it cannot be understood in isolation, but only in relation to God and the human being.

God, world, and human being are neither equivalent nor of equal standing in relation to one another. Whoever begins from God's creative will to make the world for the sake of the human being cannot think about the human being and the world as the pre-Socratics did: they begin with the self-sufficient cosmos, discern the divine in it, and see the human being as mortal. Greeks and Christians alike think of God and the world differently from the emancipated human being, released into his freedom, who takes himself as his point of departure and for whom the world is either consumable "property" (Stirner) or a human world to be produced through labor (Marx). Whoever speaks of God thereby says something about the world and the human being—for example, that both, unlike God, are not *a se* but *entia creata* [created beings]. Whoever speaks of the world thereby says something about God and the human being—for example, that God is not to be found in this world and that the human being exists in the world differently from an *animal*. Whoever speaks of the human being thereby says something about the world and God—for example, that the human being, too, is a product of the natural world and not an image of God.

NOTES

2. "Cosmotheology" here does not mean, as it does for Kant, a theology deriving God's existence from experience in general, in contrast to "ontotheology," which thinks God's existence without any experience. Rather, it is distinguished from the anthropotheology of the Christian tradition. Jacobi had already used the expression in this sense: "Christianity is essentially anthropomorphic; it teaches a God who creates the world knowingly and willingly; paganism is cosmotheistic." Christianity is anthropomorphic not merely because it believes in a personal God, but above all because this God has a partnership-like relationship with the human being. The biblical God is God only in relation to the human being, just as the latter is human only in relation to God. F. H. Jacobi, Werke IV/1 (1819), p. XLVII; compare p. 216, note.

To clarify the rupture Christianity brought about in the pagan world and its post-Christian consequences in modern meta*physics*, we must call to mind, at least in broad outline, a classical model of Greek experience of the world and of the self. Heraclitus's fragment 30 says of the world: "This cosmos here before us, the same for all and everyone, was created by neither god nor human. It always was, is, and will be. Its Logos-fire is eternally kindling and going out according to fixed measures." If the world is neither a god's mythical creation nor a human artifact, then it is there from itself, everlasting because it has neither beginning nor end, and divine already as *kosmos to theion* [the cosmos as the divine], because

nothing is missing from it as the "whole" (*holon*).[3] For Greek vision and thought, the world is the whole, "the greatest and highest," "a visible god"; philosophy, which investigates this cosmos that is divine in itself, is therefore a superterrestrial pursuit.

The world as the Greeks understood it[4] is not governed by *laws* imposed or instituted in advance by a divine or human intellect. As cosmos, it is ordered in and of itself, well-ordered. As a world-order, the cosmos is "good" and "beautiful"—even "the best and most beautiful of all that has come to be"[5]—not merely in a moral or aesthetic sense, but as "an eternal ornament," Goethe's literal translation of kosmos. In Greek usage, such good order can refer to quite different things: the artful arrangement of a garden and everything ornamental, the ordering of law and an army, or the inner constitution of a well-formed person. All these are *kata kosmon* [in accordance with order]. As Plato's Gorgias says, it is one and the same good order that holds heaven and earth, gods and human beings together—

NOTES

3. See W. Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Thinkers* (1953), pp. 28 ff. and 196 ff. The Christian apologetic reinterpretation of Heraclitus's fragment 30 is revealing: Clement of Alexandria (*The Miscellanies*, trans. F. Overbeck, 1936, pp. 478 f.) sought to find the biblical distinction between the one eternal Creator God and the perishable world in Greek cosmogonies. He interpreted the Mosaic creation story through Neoplatonic concepts and claimed that Greek philosophers had stolen from the Old Testament. Heraclitus's eternal Logos-fire, which goes out and kindles again according to fixed measures, is reinterpreted as God's creative Word, which was in the beginning; the alternation of coming-to-be and passing-away becomes the final destruction of the created world.
4. The following discussion draws on W. Kranz's monograph "Kosmos," Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte II, nos. 1–2 (1955 and 1957).
5. Plato, *Timaeus* 29a and 92c.

together. Yet the order belonging to the physical cosmos appears most clearly in the regular circuits of the heavenly bodies, especially the sun, whose course determines day and night and the succession of seasons, and through which all earthly life, including human life, is conditioned. As cosmos, unlike chaos, the world is an order that is necessarily as it is and not otherwise, and at the same time a hierarchy in which mortal human beings occupy a particular, subordinate position. The all-encompassing order of the world as a whole also governs the evident disorder and disarray in the smaller sphere of the human world, the polis. Yet human beings fail to recognize that they, too, are assigned a place within this whole, and that everything comes forth for the sake of the whole, so that blessed being may be bestowed upon the life of the All.[6]

A pseudo-Aristotelian work, *On the World*, makes a similar point: "Often philosophy has seemed to me a superterrestrial pursuit, especially when it rises to contemplate the whole world and the truth hidden within it. Knowledge of this greatest and highest thing belongs most of all to philosophy, because it is akin to it." As the highest knowledge of the whole of beings, philosophy goes beyond the earth, everything earthly, and the human being's immediate environment and community, directing its gaze to the starry heavens, which are highest and greatest both spatially and in rank. As such, they are philosophy's great and natural subject: its task is to investigate the hidden truth of this manifest world. The work continues: "But since it is not possible bodily to advance into the heavenly region, to leave the earth and look directly upon that sacred precinct, the human mind has dared the journey on the wings of its love of supreme knowledge and has brought near to the mind what is, spatially, at the greatest distance."

NOTES

6. Plato, *Laws* 903b.

Another work from the first century CE—Pliny's *Natural History*[7]—describes the world with hymn-like precision: "*mundus sacer est, aeternus, immensus; totus in toto, immo vero ipse totum; infinitus et finito similis; omnium rerum certus et similis incerto; extra, intra, cuncta complexus in se; idemque rerum naturae opus et rerum ipsa natura*." In English: The world is sacred, eternal, immeasurable; everything in everything, indeed the one whole itself; unlimited and yet like the limited; reliable in all things and yet like the uncertain; it embraces everything within itself, what appears outwardly and what is hidden within; it is at once a work of the nature of things and the one nature of things itself. This Roman conception of the mundus is still the same as the Greek cosmos: the divine and eternal whole of what exists and endures by nature, *id quod substat* [that which underlies].

When the human being understands himself correctly, he measures himself not by himself but by this superhuman, divine whole.[8] As an earthly-born living creature, he belongs to the naturally living world. It would be pointless to try to prove that nature exists, for it continually shows itself in everything that emerges from itself and returns into itself.[9] And because a human being must always already exist for another human being to be generated, Aristotle reasonably, though mistakenly, assumed that human beings must always have existed—

NOTES

7. Pliny, *Natural History* II.1.

8. Plato, *Laws* 903b; *Timaeus* 29a, 47a, 90a, 92c; *Republic* 500c; compare Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I.4.8.

9. Aristotle, *Physics* II.1.

—and must therefore have existed eternally![10] Within the hierarchy of earthly living beings, ascending from plants to *anima*ls, the human being is relatively the most complete; but unlike the eternally revolving starry world, he is mortal and cannot join the end to the beginning. In relation to the stars of the highest celestial sphere, rank diminishes as one descends. The stars surpass all earthly coming-to-be and passing-away in divine rank. Politics and ethics, therefore—the sciences of the human being—cannot be the highest sciences, since that would presuppose that the human being was the highest being in the whole of the world.[11]

The biblical presupposition of a personal Creator God, who created the world from nothing by the power of his word and will and made the human being the ground and goal of all creation—a "weakness of God for the human being" (Schelling)—was as foreign to Greek thought as the modern determination of the human being through freedom of self-determination. Yet since the Augustan age, kosmos or mundus could also mean, above all, the human world and the inhabited earth. In the Hellenistic period, when many turned away from the visible world to seek salvation for their souls in subterranean mystery cults, the cosmos ceased to be loved and revered. A fragment from the first or second century CE prophetically announced this loss of the world: "One day, through human weariness, the cosmos will no longer be admired or seem worthy of worship. This greatest good in its entirety, the best thing that ever was, is, or will be seen, will be endangered. It will become a burden to humanity and be despised. Thus this entire cosmos will no longer be loved—this glorious structure, this One, this unique and variously fashioned thing, which can be seen, revered, praised, and loved by those who have sight."

NOTES

10. See K. Oehler, Ein Mensch zeugt einen Menschen (A Human Being Begets a Human Being), 1963.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141a, 19 f.

The late-antique mood of turning away from the world is met by the early Christian renunciation of the world. The Old and New Testaments have no eyes for the cosmos. Whoever lives not, like the Greeks, in seeing and contemplation, but in faithful hearing of God's word and will, can conceive the world only as a purposeful creation and, finally, as a *machina* [machine]. If the world is a creation aimed at the human being by an extra-worldly and transcendent God, who once and for all revealed himself in a single God-man, then the world as an everlasting world is de-powered and denatured; it lacks the perfection of totality and of "*being-from-itself*," the self-movement of *physis* [nature], which requires no other maker because it brings itself forth. In Christian scholastic philosophy, the world of nature becomes the "*ars Dei*" [artwork of God].

Augustine formulated this alternative between a natural and a faith-based view of the world with unsurpassed clarity: "Of all visible things, the world is the greatest; of all invisible things, God is the greatest. That there is a world, we see; that there is a God, we believe. But where have we heard of God? Nowhere better than in Holy Scripture, where his prophet says: In the beginning God created heaven and earth."[12] As a creation willed by God, the world might not have existed, or might have been different, had God willed otherwise. The biblical Genesis, which is not a physical account, refers primarily not to the world but to a particular creature, the only image of God: the human being. If the physical cosmos is no longer acknowledged as the greatest and highest—or is acknowledged only as the greatest among visible things—

NOTES

12. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, chapters 9 and 11; Augustine, *The City of God* XI.4.

—if the highest and best is an invisible but credible Creator God, and the whole world is God's perishable creation because it is not self-sufficient, then a route opens, through the biblical God, to an anthropological concept of the world: a world for the sake of the human being. The human being's *philia* [affection] for the cosmos, and the cosmos's relation to itself, are reversed into renunciation and overcoming of the world, all the way to *contemptus mundi* [contempt for the world], because love of the cosmos is enmity toward God (James 4:4). "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes … is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2:15–17). Christian theology as a whole, from Paul and Augustine to Luther and Pascal, agrees that the world as such is not worthy of love; only God, who is love itself, and one's fellow human being, who is to be loved in God, are. Everything that stands between God and the human being is harmful, or at least irrelevant, to the soul's salvation. Augustine stated this most decisively when, in the Soliloquies, he said that he desired to know only God and his own soul, and answered the question "Nothing more?" with "Absolutely nothing." Through Augustine, the transformation and reversal, accomplished by Paul and John, of the cosmological concept of the world into a theological-anthropological one became firmly established. *Amare mundum* [to love the world] became equivalent to *non cognoscere Deum* [not to know God]. Christ freed the world from the world.

The de-worlding of the world presupposes that, for Augustine the Christian, the first and fundamental certainty is no longer the evidence of the visible world, but inner knowledge of one's own selfhood, self-reference to the *se ipsum* [self itself]: the certainty of being there and living oneself.[13]

NOTES

13. De Civitate Dei XI, 4

This *scio me vivere* [I know that I live] includes the *appetitio* [desire] for a happy life innate in human selfhood, and the truly happy life is attainable only if the human being seeks God and finds him. In relation to this individual existence, which transcends toward God, the being of the general world shared by all is no longer a superhuman, eternal world-order, but an external world, something outside. And an external world it has remained for our general consciousness to this day, despite all alleged overcoming of the split between subject and object—probably because we are still Christians, even if only in the way one is German or French, without believing in God or thinking about the salvation of the soul.

Nothing, Augustine thinks, and so do we, does a human being feel as intimately as himself. This intimate self, conceived metaphysically in Descartes's *cogito me cogitare* [I think that I think], in Kant's transcendental I, in Husserl's pure Ego, in Heidegger's concept of Dasein [being-there], whose being is at issue for it, and in Jaspers's account of existence, is also, according to Augustine, that through which we perceive "everything else"—*etiam caetera* [all the rest].

NOTES

14. "Everyone knows, then, that what has understanding has being and life … in a distinctive and therefore superior way." Augustine, *On the Trinity* X.

15. When Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers speak of the world, they do not mean nature as it is in itself, but the "total horizon" of intentional consciousness and its "accomplishments," our own "being-in-the-world," or "world-orientation" in the service of clarifying one's existence. Despite their criticism of Descartes, they remain within the Christian tradition. Jaspers rejects the idea of an all-encompassing, eternally self-sufficient world in favor of interpreting the biblical Creator God as a simile for the transcendent origin of human existence. "For this belongs to our essence: instead of understanding ourselves from the world, there is something in us that can set itself against all worldly being. Insofar as we are in the world from elsewhere" (Jaspers does not tell us from where), "we have a task in the world that goes beyond the world." Karl Jaspers, "The Idea of World-Creation," *Merkur* (1952), issue 5.

In the language of the philosophy of reflection, the world is "constituted" through our consciousness of it and our comportment toward it. It does not live from itself, and still less is the human being a product of the life of the world. The root of this "Copernican revolution," which philosophically begins with Descartes, is the all-transforming Christian experience of the self, for which the world is something "left over," outside our own I, rather than the mortal human being being a phenomenon within the whole of the world, distinguished by the ability to contemplate and investigate it.[16] The reversal from the world toward oneself presupposes that the Christian-shaped human being is not at home with himself within the whole of the world and therefore wills to understand himself not from the world but in and through himself: *se ipsum per se ipse videre* [to see oneself by oneself through oneself]. Thrown back upon himself by the world, the human being experiences himself as the greatest wonder and riddle. For Augustine, the most astonishing thing is not the world but himself. Yet people pass carelessly by this *grande profundum* [great abyss] and instead ask curiously about the visible things of the world, whose images are in our memory while the things themselves, in their extension, are *outside us*.[17]

NOTES

16. Anaxagoras, fragment 29; Plato, *Timaeus* 47a–c and 90a–d; Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics I.5.

17. Augustine, *Confessions* X.8.15. Corresponding to this turning away from the external world toward the self, which retains everything in its *memoria* [memory], Augustine analyzes time not, following Aristotle, in relation to the visible movement of the heavenly bodies, but by reflecting on the inner movement of the human soul. With closed eyes, turned away from the visible world, one can perceive within oneself the passage of time—its now, before, and after—for example, by silently reciting a verse. No intuition of a span of movement is needed.

With this entry into inwardness, which corresponds to stepping outside the order of the world that encompasses the human being, two things happen: the human being becomes placeless and homeless within the whole of the world, a contingent and ultimately absurd *ek-sistence* [existence], thrown into it one does not know how or from where; and precisely through this exceptional position, alienated from the whole of beings, he becomes especially important to himself. However differently the *se ipsum* is interpreted in post-Christian philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger, the consequence for understanding the world remains the same: the world is no longer the first and last thing, all-encompassing and absolutely self-sufficient, but is related through God to the human being—first as the crown of creation, and then as the self-conscious subject.

With Augustine's first sustained reflection on the Christian self, all the fundamental concepts of post-Christian meta*physics* change, reaching their turning point only in Nietzsche. God is no longer an ambiguous *to theion* [the divine], a predicate of the cosmos as a whole and as perfect; the world is no longer a superhuman world-order made by neither God nor human beings; and the human being is no longer a *zoon logon echon* [living being possessing reason] among earthly living beings, but *a se*lf-related self that originally related itself to God and then became autonomous, now designing the structure of the world and making world-plans as God's successor. According to Kant,[18] it is enough for us to have a piece of matter at our disposal and know its general law of motion to build a world from it—not the one actual world that builds itself, but a conceivable one

NOTES

18. Immanuel Kant, *General Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, Introduction.

among possible others—a proposition unthinkable in Greek *physics*, even among the atomists, for what is distinctive of the physical is precisely that it cannot be made, but comes forth and recedes of itself. The question of which design or model corresponds to the world itself becomes a pseudo-question when the world itself becomes a world of human knowledge, a world-formula for which, in the ideal case, any visualizability—and thus even a model—is dispensable. The modern mathematical physicist lives outside his science in the visible world,[19] whose light has become a *lucus a non lucendo* [a "grove" that gives no light]. Goethe's struggle against Newton was not a misunderstanding, nor simply one account of light and color that could sit beside the account offered by physical optics. It was a final attempt to save the testimony of the senses and appearance, because only in appearance does essence also come into view.

Anyone who, like modern *physics* as a whole, does not trust the testimony of the senses but seeks what is essential behind appearances commits an all-too-human inconsistency if he still speaks of light and darkness or heaven and earth, sees constellations in the sky, and gives the daily rising of the sun precedence over other solar systems—not to mention assigning and fitting the human being into the "harmony" of an opaque turbulence.

The defining feature of the modern concept of the world is that it is an abstracted concept at all: the world and its own order are no longer contemplated directly,

NOTES

19. The possibility that the modern physicist's and astronomer's construction of the world might become real for human beings as such arises when people leave the earth bodily—not merely in thought—and venture into space, even if only as far as the Moon.

but are experimentally tested through specific experimental arrangements and mathematically calculated and designed.[20] The decisive turning point, however, did not come with Copernicus and Kepler, but with Francis Bacon's equation of knowledge with power and Descartes's similar project of making nature controllable through scientific knowledge for human welfare.

Although Kepler, as a believing Christian, was convinced that the world had been created for the sake of the human being,[21] he was also so filled with reverence for the world that it remained for him a *Deus visibilis* [visible God], the sun an *imago Dei* [image of God], and the earth an *anima* [soul] with *memoria* [memory] and *imaginatio* [*imaginatio*n]. What Copernicus and Kepler intended was to think God's thoughts after him in the "book" of nature. Yet if Kepler could still believe that one must read the book of nature in order to celebrate God, that belief already contained the other possibility: nature could be understood without the book of the Bible, and divine world-geometry could become autonomous mathematical *physics*, no longer in need of God. This emancipation of the new science of the world began with Galileo and ended with Kant's destruction of the cosmological and physico-theological proofs of God's existence. Newton, by contrast, still saw a natural proof of God in the law of gravitation and, alongside the Principia Mathematica of natural philosophy, wrote a commentary on the Revelation of John and the prophecies in the Book of Daniel. Very different is Descartes, whose construction of the world rests on the methodical destruction of the certainty that the world is well-ordered, whether by God or in itself.

NOTES

20. Galileo describes the world by constructing "*laws*"; his advance beyond Aristotle's common sense consists in describing the world as we do not experience it. He refutes Aristotelian *physics* by mathematics. See F. von Weizsäcker, *The Scope of Science* (1964), and F. Wagner, *Science and the Endangered World* (1964), pp. 29 ff.

21. Kepler tried to soften the disproportion between the new Copernican system and humanity by arguing that the universe's infinite size did not imply a diminished importance for human beings. Compared with the world-system, the human being was a tiny speck—but one that bore God's image and was thereby superior to the whole world, just as God is absolutely superior to creation. See A. Blumenberg, *The Copernican Turn* (1965), pp. 122 ff.

The principle of Descartes's physical construction of the world is the human being insofar as he thinks and possesses certain mathematical ideas. The only scientific grasp of the world begins by radically doubting its appearance; it strips the visible world of its sensory qualities in order to rebuild it from the *res cogitans* [thinking thing] as *res extensa* [extended thing], a world of mathematical natural science. The final consequence of this method of returning to oneself in order to find a rational access to God and the world is Eddington's thesis that the physicist recovers from nature only what he previously put into it. Heisenberg calls this "the essential insight of modern *physics*": its novelty lies in knowing that it does not encounter nature as such, but only our scientific relation to it, and thus ourselves—a natural science that turns nature upside down.[22]

All this, however, follows from Cartesian and Kantian critique, just as that critique is a distant consequence of the Christian "stance of consciousness." "The Christian stance of consciousness (radical transcendence) originally made possible, through its freedom from the world, the modern mechanistic-constructivist consciousness" (Yorck von Wartenburg).

NOTES

22. *The Picture of Nature in Contemporary Physics*, pp. 17 ff. and 111. See the critique by Theodor Litt, *Studium Generale* (1956), pp. 351 ff.